Don't Do It on My Carpet: The Humor of William Faulkner's "Barn Burning"

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Abstract: *William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" has been appreciated critically in just about every way but for its humor. While appreciations not concerned with humor are crucial to understanding the work, they can also be limiting. This discussion of Faulkner and humor in "Barn Burning" will acknowledge that humor stoops to low levels and crudity. But it also soars to great heights, with Faulkner's command of the English language and ability to draw allusions effortlessly into the fabric of his story.*

Keywords: *William Faulkner, humor, the South, "Barn Burning"*

There is no denying that William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" is not permeated by a sense of tragedy and worse. If one focuses on the childhood of Sarty, who lives in an infernal parenting situation dominated by a mean-spirited, outrightly abusive father who is a pyromaniac, accompanied in strange concert by a loving but ineffectual mother with a bullying older brother, and two sisters who could be poster children for inertia, with a tag-along aunt, tears could flow from the reader and even anger could be expressed at the situation depicted. I would like to propose another reading of "Barn Burning," in which any moisture from the tear ducts and surge of energy expended comes from readers responding to its humor.[1]

1 I wish to thank Mark Shackleton for his sympathetic reading of the manuscript-in-progress. His detailed commentary anticipated and encouraged more exploration in the direction I wanted to undertake my study of Faulkner.

"Barn Burning" has been appreciated critically in just about every way but for its humor. While such appreciations not concerned with humor are crucial to understanding the work, they can also be limiting. Hans Skei, addressing the maturation process so often focused on in "Barn Burning," gives caution, noting, "Despite the central position of Sarty in the story, it may still be fair to say that Faulkner's ultimate concern is not with the boy. We reduce the value of the story if we only find an initiation rite played out or demonstrated in it or just an enactment of an old and universal moral dilemma" (61). But appreciations not connected to humor are inevitable, even if they go beyond what ails the boy or father in "Barn Burning." As James M. Cox notes in what is in many ways a defensive strategy to justify the study of humor in Faulkner, "the need for meaning is greater in Faulkner's world than the need for humor. Precisely because it is so great, the humor that is so irrepressibly present in Yoknapatawpha County is inordinately neglected" (3).

This neglect of critical appreciation of humor in the work of Faulkner is being rectified. In 1984, the annual *Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference* in Oxford, Mississippi, was devoted to "Faulkner and Humor." The subsequent book publication of the conference proceedings offers essays that leave little doubt as to the prevalence of humor in William Faulkner's writings and his ability as a humorist. Doreen Fowler writes that these essays "explore various aspects of Faulkner's rich and inexhaustible comic art, they all hold in common one axiom: that William Faulkner, the recognized genius of tragic art, is a master of comic forms as well, and further, that neither mode, tragic or comic, is ever very far from the other in Faulkner's world" (ix). Acknowledging that critics have discussed Faulkner's humor, James M. Cox writes, "it is so much easier in writing about him [Faulkner] to struggle for the meaning, the answers to his riddles and confusions, and the philosophy informing his novels than it is to remember the incredible laughter at the heart of his world" (1). Cox makes the point also that humor is "not a separate, subordinate aspect of Faulkner's world" (1). Furthermore, humor is difficult to discuss, as "Humor, on the other hand [as opposed to reason and meaning], is a response which suspends both will and reason" (3). Patricia R. Schroeder states that "Faulkner openly acknowledged his debt to the thinking of Henri Bergson, and Bergson's essay 'Laughter' can help illuminate the grim comedy beneath the surface of *As I Lay Dying*" (41).

Discussions of Faulkner and humor since the 1984 *Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference* fortunately have continued. One notable contribution is

that by James B. Carothers and Kimma Jean Sheldon, who, in their essay, "Comprehending Faulkner's Humor," offer a cataloging of important discussions of humor and Faulkner as well as approaches to understanding Faulkner and humor. Their contribution, along with that of others on the subject of Faulkner and humor, is now so extensive that a project of an annotated bibliography on the subject awaits an enterprising scholar to assist other Faulkner scholars in their analysis and appreciation of Faulkner's vast Yoknapatawpha postage stamp that has been hammered to a surface area rivaling John Donne's famous poetic conceit.

While existing discussions are important contributions to Faulkner scholarship in furthering our understanding and appreciation of Faulkner's art, a common difficulty is facing surveyors of the topic Faulkner and humor. Even when using theories of humor, most notably Henri Bergson's essay on laughter as a source and springboard, which has become a critical mainstay, we are faced with the problem and assumption of thinking there should be "a unified field theory of humor that can or should organize each of Faulkner's humorous plots, character types, devices, or tropes into a single coherent exegesis" (Carothers and Sheldon 437-38). Furthermore, "Comprehending Faulkner's humor, however, most frequently means comprehending a particular moment in a particular text" (Carothers and Sheldon 438). Acknowledging these difficulties, the purpose of my essay is to at least explore humor in Faulkner's "Barn Burning" and discuss its presence and variations, to mitigate the absence of the mapping of humor in this famous short story that is so frequently studied for everything but humor. A discussion of Faulkner and humor in "Barn Burning" will acknowledge that humor stoops to low levels and crudity. But it also soars to great heights, with Faulkner's command of the English language and ability to draw allusions effortlessly into the fabric of his story.

It is politically incorrect to make fun of "cripples"; even the term is forbidden in public discourse. But if we imagine the story in visual terms, the repeated references to the stiff-footed hobbling by Abner, barn burner extraordinaire (certainly a legend in his own mind) makes us laugh. Were one to turn "Barn Burning" into a play, the comedic potential of a man walking stiffly across the stage would be tremendous. Chester, the limping deputy in *Gunsmoke*, provides a comic touch with his limp, as viewers are never allowed to forget his pronounced limp. Similarly, Faulkner draws attention to the limp to what is an obsessive, relentless degree. That Faulkner himself might have found amusement in someone walking as if wounded

might well stem from his own posing as a wounded war veteran. Would the younger Faulkner as *poseur* not have gotten some satisfaction out of thus pulling the wool over people's eyes and translated perhaps this acting and trickery onto the pages of "Barn Burning"? As David Minter has written, about Faulkner and his war wounds, "Many of Faulkner's *fabrications* [emphasis mine] about his war experiences, including those about injuries to his hip and his head, were clearly *self-enhancing* [emphasis mine]" (54). Minter also uses the word "affected" (54). Comedians are well known to turn wounds into laughter and gain an audience's approval in this way, and the connection between Faulkner's affectations and the comedy of the limping Abner is a representational portrayal both of the act of the comedian and the psychic and psychological wounds used in the comedian's persona. Furthermore, Abner's limp lends itself to instilling in some readers' minds sympathy for the barn burner. Whether Faulkner, also an outsider, is using Abner as a proxy here, and looking for sympathy on some psychological level, is something we can only speculate on. One thing is clear: the humor of the wounded is present.

The source of Abner's wound that caused his limp is also amusing in the way it is rendered. At one point in the story we are told that Abner has been a horse trader. Sarty overhears his father in town making conversation, "heard his father tell a long and unhurried story out of the time before the birth of the older brother even when he had been a professional horsetrader" (*CS* 19-20). On another occasion, Faulkner phrases the injury of the "horse trader" as having been sustained in this way: "[T]he wiry figure walking a little stiffly from where a Confederate provost's man's musket ball had taken him in the heel on a stolen horse thirty years ago . . ." (*CS* 5). Abner Snopes is some horse trader indeed. Some purveyors of redemptive justice might also derive a certain kind of pleasure from learning that Abner is physically being punished for his thievery, though hanging would have been deemed appropriate punishment at the time for Abner's crime, and sadistic pleasure is beyond the scope of this essay.

In case we feel better about ourselves to laugh with rather than at Abner, an opportunity is provided for us which is a moment of comedy that combines lowbrow with high comedy: "The boy watched him pivot on the good leg and saw the stiff foot drag round the arc of the turning, leaving a final and fading smear" (*CS* 12). In an era and climate of social injustice, the sharecropper Abner is able to exact some retaliation against the rich and high-handed de Spain and his wife. Abner does the next best thing to

what people threaten and find to be humorous revenge: to shit on someone's prized possession. Thus Faulkner satirizes genteel society by overturning what would be expected from high comedy. No witty dialogue but an explicit excremental message is left on the fine and expensive carpet.

Much more humor is derived from this smearing incident. We get to laugh at Major de Spain, surely a man in charge, who "whipped" must get his carpet cleaned up, not necessarily because it is a priority stemming from his innate desires, but because his wife is very upset and Major de Spain will be "in the doghouse" until the rug is clean. If like sexist pigs we have laughed at Mrs. de Spain right after the act of smearing, "It [the door] closed right behind them, upon the hysteric and indistinguishable woman-wail" (*CS* 12), we now smile or chuckle or laugh (depending how comfortable or uncomfortable we are with traditional roles as they relate to marriage) when Major de Spain, applying a fine for Abner to pay for his ambulatory transgression, says, "That won't keep Mrs. de Spain quiet but maybe it will teach you to wipe your feet off before you enter her house again" (*CS* 16). Like most men, the mighty Major de Spain is in reality ruled by his wife and knows, as most men do, if the wife is not happy, the husband is not happy. Certainly uneasy laughter should be a reaction by many married men reading this part of "Barn Burning."

The act of smearing by the limping Abner Snopes is also the cause of further humor, this time expressed in a more gentle way by Faulkner's elaborate description of the rug after it has been cleaned: "The tracks of his father's foot were gone. Where they had been were now long, water-cloudy scoriations *resembling the sporadic course of a lilliputian mowing machine* [emphasis mine]" (*CS* 14). The image of miniature lawn mowing tracks, combined with a literary allusion, is funny, even engaging. The description is also the comedy of register at work, something which Faulkner is either unable to or refuses to resist, with his use of such expressions as "scoriations," "sporadic course," and a literary allusion to Swift in a story set in the deep South. At the same time, the comedy could result from a child's, Sarty's, perception of what are an adult's unacceptable actions, but it appears unlikely the sharecropper family would own and read from a book called *Gulliver's Travels*. Another cause for amusement involving the rug is that it is washed imperfectly, foreshadowed earlier on when the sisters set up the wash pot and we are told, "He could smell the harsh homemade lye they were using" (*CS* 13). Turning the rug over for cleaning to the Snopes family is, as the saying goes, "a recipe for disaster," "something bad lying-

in-waiting," and the humor is not lost on us when we learn of the crude washing methods about to be employed to restore an expensive rug and we can guess what the final outcome will be. No gentle-rinse cycle here; had such existed, it would have been reserved for the upper classes.

The smearing of the carpet is cause for sustained story humor in the story. When we witness the calculations of punishment undertaken both by Major de Spain and the Justice of the Peace, we find math gone awry. Even if the calculations are employed under the guise of fairness, trying to figure out exactly the cost of one hundred dollars of the rug and how a charge of twenty bushels (*CS* 16) against Abner establishes some mathematical justice, how do they make any rational sense? We can only laugh or scoff at such presumption. The comedy of erratic math manipulation continues at the hearing by the Justice of the Peace, who thinks he can determine economic justice, as if there ever could be such handed down or out by a human being:

> I'm going to find against you, Mr. Snopes, I'm going to find that you were responsible for the injury to Major de Spain's rug and hold you liable for it. But twenty bushels of corn seems a little high for a man in your circumstances to have to pay. Major de Spain can stand a ninety-five dollar loss on something he paid cash for, you can stand a five-dollar loss you haven't earned yet. I hold you in damages to Major de Spain to the amount of ten bushels of corn over and above your contract with him, to be paid to him out of your crop at gathering time. Court adjourned. (*CS* 18-19)

The passage is a mockup and mockery of a math word problem. It has come about as if from a calculator programmed to employ logic randomly and imperfectly, as only a human being can. If the anxiety-ridden Sarty's head is spinning at the beginning in the crowded store that is the location for the first hearing by a Justice of the Peace we are witness to, our heads as English majors should similarly spin or be muddled from the math problem introduced during the second hearing. One is tempted to call in Benjy from *The Sound and the Fury* to lend a helping hand, his other reserved for a quarter.

Leaving the realm of the carpet and its humor that Faulkner manages to weave into the fabric of the story, occasions of other origins abound in "Barn Burning." The description of the sisters as "bovine" on more than one occasion, crude as this humor may be, produces a smile or chuckle, as Faulkner extends the description, referring to the sisters as "big, bovine" (*CS* 9), adding to this kind of physicality their "spread heavy thighs" (*CS* 22), and "an incredible expanse of pale cloth and a flutter of tawdry rib-

bons" (*CS*13). This is a sad humor, the sisters' ribbons and weight impotent to attract much male attention. Faulkner continues an aggregation of weight, with his depiction of the sisters, their "impression of being, encompassing as much living meat and volume and weight as any other two of the family" (CS 23) as well as letting us know "the two girls emanated an incorrigible idle inertia" (*CS* 13), and describing them as "stooped, broad, lethargic" (*CS* 13). It is sadly humorous to observe the girls practice their obstinate laziness. Not even the evil and foul-tempered Abner can quite light a fire underneath them. In addition, switching to another animal comparison, Faulkner continues his humor of the crude when the sisters are not happy about their latest living quarters. "'Likely hit ain't fitten for hawgs,' one of sisters said" (*CS* 9). To which Faulkner, with impeccable comedic timing responds by putting these words immediately into Abner's voice: "'Nevertheless, fit it will and you you'll *hog* it [emphasis mine] and like it'" (*CS* 9). Abner employs humor as a sharp weapon in this instance.

The girls' immobility and Abner's perpetual motion are part of the comic tension of "Barn Burning." We are told the family has had "twelve movings" (*CS* 10) and as Faulkner recounts the way of life of the Snopes family, we follow along in the manner one would put a check next to a grocery item, anticipating and expecting the next item, only the frequent changing of walls by the Snopes family is stubbornly manic, as is the father's refusal to learn from any lesson or experience. "There he goes again" is a reaction Faulkner is able to elicit from us in his skilled handling of the narrative. This repetition is amplified by us learning the boy is not new to the "court circuit" or his father's barn burnings. While the burning of barns on one level is no laughing matter, the cartoon-like description of Abner, achieved by such touches as "something cut ruthlessly from tin, depthless" (*CS* 10) and "as though, sidewise to the sun, it [his figure] would cast no shadow" (*CS* 10), repeated connections to metal, "cut from tin" (*CS* 8), the effect of exaggeration in describing the character of Abner with words such as "his latent ravening ferocity" (*CS* 7) and "his ferocious conviction in the rightness of his own actions" (*CS* 7), along with his being "without face or depth — a shape black, flat, and bloodless as though cut from tin in the iron folds of the frockcoat" (CS 8), offers us a warped version of a super hero or a gangster as misshapen, comic, and weird as Popeye in *Sanctuary*. It is difficult not to laugh at this caricature of a man (both Popeye and Abner), though in "Barn Burning" we miss the comic touches Faulkner employs more extensively (he has room in the novel), such as Popeye's whinny-

ing like a horse to convey sexual excitement and peeping through a door's keyhole, taking in the sexual act of Red as his stand-in and Temple Drake. Interestingly, the evil Popeye is also compared to tin, having a stiff suit, viciousness, and other unnatural characteristics (*Sanctuary* 4-6). Asking oneself why Faulkner employs humor to create a caricature of a man, one answer could be that Faulkner does so in order to provide some relief from the harsh subject matter of Sarty's abusive childhood, and Abner's criminal acts and mistreatment of, and disregard for, women. There is only so much darkness a reader can take without some comic relief. Similarly, persons finding themselves in difficult and dangerous situations, those in "real life" and those in Faulkner's short story, employ humor to diffuse situations and to cope with reality. In the case of "Barn Burning," however, the relief appears reserved for its readers, unless we surmise that characters in the world of "Barn Burning" might find it amusing, for example, that Abner soils the expensive carpet. However, at no time in the story are we given any indication that the indentured servants or other poor people find the soiling an occasion for laughter or celebration. The narrator does not reveal that any of the bystanders during the Justice of the Peace hearings find events amusing. It would be difficult to establish any sort of humor experienced or expressed by the Justices of the Peace or Major de Spain, unless their high-handed handling of punishment for Abner is an expression of these powerful men finding humor in either the punishment, poverty, or subversiveness of Abner. One such single incident does occur, however, and it will be mentioned later in Faulkner's use of dialogue and humor.

Faulkner for his readers further makes the pyromaniac actions of Abner humorous, or rather the watching of their preparation, as "pyro-man" predictably repeats his actions, including the donning of ceremonial clothing, getting the kerosene prepared, even having a kind of "last supper" in town on Saturday before his next nefarious, with a capital N, act. In addition, Sarty's crying out of "'Ain't you going to send even a nigger?'" followed by "'At least you sent a nigger before!'" (*CS* 21), in a warped sense of goodness that at the same time indicates that his father's pyromanic behavior will not stop or be stopped, is humor which is both appropriate and inappropriate for the situation.

Faulkner also infuses a sense of humor in the story through the use of dialogue, in part with jokes such as the Justice of the Peace commenting on the name of young Sarty: "'Talk louder. Colonel Sartoris? I reckon anybody named for Colonel Sartoris in this county can't help but the truth, can

they?'" (*CS* 4) The Justice, described as a "shabby, collarless" (*CS* 4) man, is by no means of the social station granted Colonel Sartoris or Major de Spain; he attempts to establish his superiority over Abner and his son, to set himself socially apart from them, by joking at the expense of the lower class or "white trash" when he has the opportunity to exert power while presiding over the hearing. The dialect rendition by Faulkner of a black man saying, "'Wood and hay kin burn'" (*CS* 4) is comic also because it is so stereotypical, as if dialogue put into a black man's mouth by a white man. It is as if we are witnessing the reverse image and exaggerated linguistic construct of the redneck Larry the Cable guy in this dialect assignation by Faulkner. Similarly, the line, "'Wipe yo foots, white man, fo you come in here. Major ain't home nohow'" (*CS* 11) can be regarded as caricature. These lines are as purposefully-bad as the often badly-imitated and quoted line spoken by the maid in *Gone with the Wind*, "I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' babies!"

A form of humor as simple as it is delightful, and more benign, is found in the scene of the hearing when the tale of the hog that gets into Mr. Harris's corn is told and we have a folksy anecdote to introduce us also to the negligent behavior of Abner Snopes. James B. Carothers and Kimma Jean Sheldon note that "Faulkner's humor in general and in several particulars has been convincingly argued to derive from the traditions and techniques of the American Southwestern humorists, and Faulkner himself acknowledged his indebtedness to these predecessors" (440). Enjoying the humor of the pig that gets out and is returned to its negligent owner does not mean that Faulkner necessarily made up this story himself. But as Daniel Hoffman has commented, "When we seek evidence of the folktales Faulkner knew, they prove hard to pin down" (58). The point is that Faulkner is comfortable working with such humor even as he is producing literary art of the highest order. The incident of the escaped pig which is offered to its negligent owner, Abner, for a one-dollar pound fee, is another instance that makes it clear Faulkner in "Barn Burning" is able to infuse a tremendous amount and variety of humor in such a limited amount of space.

Moving away from this folksy kind of humor, a tale about the pig that gets out and eats someone else's corn, we experience during the second Justice of the Peace hearing depicted in the story the humor of verbal slip-up, when Sarty, thinking a step ahead of his father's deeds and also remembering his habitual burnings in the past, unnecessarily brings up this taboo subject:

> "He ain't done it! He ain't burnt . . ."
> "Go back to the wagon," his father said.
> "Burnt?" the Justice said. "Do I understand this rug was burned too?"
> "Does anybody here claim it was?" his father said. "Go back to the wagon." (*CS* 18)

The above dialogue, based on misunderstanding, is dramatically ironic but is also the stuff of sitcoms. Further misunderstanding occurs through confusion that involves what could be thought of a mock heroic allusion. In the midst of the tense closing action scene, Faulkner writes, "Behind him the white man [de Spain] was shouting, 'My horse! Fetch my horse!'" (*CS* 23). This rhetorical flourish by the mighty, high-handed de Spain is reminiscent of Shakespeare's King Richard III's "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!" While King Richard III dies on the battle field, uncertainty of death reigns on the smaller battle field of de Spain and Abner. The fleeing Sarty hears "the shot and, an instant later, two shots" (*CS* 24), and is not present to witness any killing(s). Hugh Ruppersburg, among others, notes that the story ends ambiguously as it relates to the killing. "Abner has either been captured or shot to death by Major de Spain" (248). Cleanth Brooks writes, "But did he [Sarty] cause his father's death? No, because if we read *The Hamlet*, of which 'Barn Burning' was originally meant to be the opening chapter, we shall find that Ab Snopes apparently escaped, and lived on like Falstaff, if not to burn another barn, at least to threaten another barn" (18-19).[2] Theresa Towner and James B. Carothers offer the possibility that the shots heard are fired at Abner and Sarty's brother (19). Further speculation, as to whether Abner himself might have a gun that he fires, complicates matters further. The uncertainty of who is shot, and/or killed is reminiscent of many a famous historic battle scene. The comedy in the scene involves further irony. The young Sartry could have it all wrong — his father might be alive — as Sarty is busy turning him into a war hero who now has fallen. We learn from Sarty, as he employs the *past tense*, "'He was brave!'" (*CS* 24) and "'He was! . . .'" (*CS* 24).

Faulkner's repeated use in some variation throughout "Barn Burning" of "despair and grief, the old fierce pull of blood" (*CS* 3), including "the fear

2 For an interesting discussion that shifts the usual focus away from father and son, see Sigrid Hanson Fowler's "Lennie Snopes, A Closer Look." Hanson Fowler argues, "The 'pull of blood' may define his loyalties to Abner, but the boy has another bloodline, a powerful influence stirs his inner conflict and impacts his decision" (424). Furthermore, "In Lennie Snopes he [Faulkner] suggests who Sarty really is and also prepares us for the changes we will soon see in him" (427).

and despair and the old grief of blood" (*CS* 5), "'You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to you'" (*CS* 8), and finally, "the grief and despair now no longer terror and fear but just grief and despair" (*CS* 24), during Sarty's escape when he has passed a hill and is about to enter the dark woods, contributes to make the story a tragicomedy, though the exact definition of tragicomedy to this day remains elusive. Our notion of Aristotelian tragedy in "Barn Burning" is satisfied by the tragic journey of self-discovery of Sarty and we experience catharsis when he ultimately escapes, albeit psychically wounded, after we have experienced "pity and fear," aroused in us, as it has been by Sarty experiencing a terrifying childhood at the hands of his father. As will be pointed out toward the conclusion of this discussion, it is not until the end of "Barn Burning" that comedy rests and finally is excluded from the text.

There is one further incident of humor in "Barn Burning" that I wish to discuss and it reminds me of some of the goings-on in Faulkner's "gangster novel" *Sanctuary*. Just as the humor of *Sanctuary* is derived in part from Faulkner's use of gangster novel clichés, it appears Faulkner has been watching gangster movies or very bad movies when the family clumsily is about to tie up Sarty to a bedpost to prevent his running off to snitch to de Spain. The comedy of errors, with the brother's suggestion, "Better tie him up to the bedpost" (*CS* 22), the father's gruff "Do like I told you," (*CS* 22) and the father commandeering "Hold him" (*CS* 22), followed by, "Not you" (*CS* 22) and "Lennie. Take hold of him" (*CS* 22), and finally, "Maybe I'd better tie him" (*CS* 22) features a funny and frenzied, clumsy routine of the "baddies" restraining one of their own, whom, in bad gangster novel prose had to hear a "voice [that] *hissed* [emphasis mine]" (*CS* 5) along with the marquee-like greeting of "'Barn Burner!'" (*CS* 5), exclamation mark included.

However, very close to the entire repertoire of humor that Faulkner showcases in "Barn Burning" is an underlying, menacing current. It is a menace and despair greater than that experienced in *Sanctuary*, where dark humor is an appropriate companion to a literary gangster novel. George Garrett, in his appropriately titled essay, "'Fix My Hair, Jack': The Dark Side of Faulkner's Jokes," comments, "The dark side of Faulkner's jokes, his jests so often played at the expense of our best expectation that we gradually begin to expect them as much or more than anything else, comes from the fact that they are almost always present, even in the most serious works (again in a Shakespearian manner), never more than a paper-thin partition away

from the most tragic or poignant or pathetic or simply horrifying scenes and events" (220). However, especially toward the end of "Barn Burning" the paper-thin partition is more like cardboard, to continue to build on Garrett's metaphor. Ultimately the humor will give way to that great evil in "Barn Burning," what on one level is a serious story about a child, abuse, and a pyromaniac's terrorizing of society.

If this humor has held at bay or made bearable the awful reality that the young Sarty and also the community members affected by Abner's misdeeds experience, we get a foreshadowing glimpse of its demise. As if offering commentary on this practice of humor and its relation to reality, Faulkner depicts a frightening hilarity when he offers us the description of a circus poster on the Saturday that the Snopes' males visit for the second judicial hearing the town to afterwards have the tires of the wagon repaired and partake in a ritualistic meal before the arc of the action begins to take a truly hellish turn:

> And then his father came up beside him where he stood before a tattered last year's circus poster on the other side of the store, gazing rapt and quiet at the scarlet horses, the incredible poisings and convolutions of tulle and tights and the painted leer of comedians, and said, "It's time to eat." (*CS* 20)

This is hardly what we consider a normal description of a circus poster, not that we would expect any "normal" or commercially viable advertising print from Faulkner. But the poster is ominous as the contortions of acrobats, the description of the horses, and especially the smiles of the comedians are ghastly, perverted, kinked, as if they are depicting an unreality that in truth is unpleasant were it to be unmasked. And so it is with the ending of the humor streak in Faulkner's short story.

Only after Sarty manages to escape proper the physical presence of the other characters in the story, as he enters the scene of the last paragraph of the story, are we able to leave the land of comedy and for good. Following along closely with Sarty's impressions as he runs through nature, one is hard pressed to find anything funny. And the finale, the final sentence, "He did not look back" (*CS* 25), is a full-stop statement that the comedy is over with. Painful healing is probably all that is left, and we are fortunate that Faulkner knew when to hold his tongue and cap his pen, just as earlier he let liberal amounts of comedy escape through the ink of "Barn Burning," which ironically is filled with darkness of life as it is lit up by fire.

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